

From Social Justice, to Neo-liberalism, to Authoritarian Nationalism: Where Is the Zimbabwean State Going?

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Zimbabwe is currently facing a crisis of unimaginable proportions: the economy has collapsed and the majority of the population lives below the poverty line. The Zimbabwean opposition and civil society are struggling for democratisation while the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries have been unable, because of the lack of consensus, to find opportunities for a negotiated solution to the country's crisis.

This presentation is an attempt to look at the crisis in Zimbabwe from the perspective of the internal struggle over democratisation and the transformation of the political consensus within state institutions under the hegemonic pressure of the ruling party. Such an analysis requires a retracing of the political and economic history of the post-independence period. Indeed, the search for a negotiated solution that could favour the correct implementation of the 2005 parliamentary elections, may only occur by recognising the historical processes at the base of the country's fundamental problems: the legitimacy of its leadership and the role of the state; the issue of democracy and human rights; and the land question. In particular, as Moore suggests, the impasse of primitive accumulation; the simmering dilemma of the nation-state formation; and the democratisation process are still open issues (Moore, 2001). These are issues which have never been solved, which have been relegated to the background, and which only became explicit when the interests of the powerful white minority were challenged or, to put it better, when the post-independence 'elite consensus' was brought to a crisis, a consensus which, albeit subject to transformations over the years, had to some extent lasted until 1997. At that point, it became clear that the 'historic compromise' had come to an end, showing the crisis of the post-colonial state and the resurgence of the instrumental use of nationalism (at internal level) and regional solidarity (at regional level). It is worth noting that the Zimbabwean crisis has a strong regional dimension (it is sufficient to think of the land question in South Africa, and even more so in Namibia, where a new phase of land reform is starting). In this regard, as Raftopoulos explains: "Zimbabwe provides an important case study for broader economic and political problems in a region with certain linkages in the mode of colonial penetration, forms of liberation struggle, and problems of post-colonial development" (Raftopoulos, 2003a:2). Three elements seem to be of particular relevance:

- The crisis – which does not mean the exhaustion – of the post-colonial state. Particularly, by showing its inability to reach its economic goals, the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) highlighted the limitations in fulfilling both economic efficiency and development in the context of globalisation. This resulted in a wide crisis of legitimacy which encouraged the abandonment of the neo-liberal policies, while no viable alternative project to ESAP was found;
- The role, transformation and breakdown of the ‘elite consensus’. In the 1990s the internal political cleavages and the increasing economic crisis fostered the breakdown of the post-independence consensus and transformed the internal struggle for democracy;
- The process of re-legitimacy. Even if this presentation deals with domestic issues, there can be little doubt that one of the most significant aspects of the current crisis in Zimbabwe has been its international character. In the need to regain consensus, President Robert Mugabe and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) articulated the crisis through a re-editing of a reinforced nationalist project and through an anti-imperialist and a Pan-Africanist position. In this respect, both the land question and the Congo war were used as a legitimate language of historical redress and renewed African solidarity.

In the next sections I will present and discuss these issues following three historical stages that were also marked by the three stages of land reform debates and policies:

- The first stage is the socialist and egalitarian phase of social justice, implemented in the 1980s, characterised by a high level of social redistribution and by the land resettlement programme;
- The second stage, related to the implementation of ESAP and to the indigenisation processes, deals with both the need for primitive accumulation and the need to redefine the economic structure without, however, radically transforming the ‘elite consensus’ of the post-settler state but reformulating it to three actors: government, white capital, and new black entrepreneurs;
- The third stage is the current crisis and the battle for internal and regional re-legitimisation at all costs. The disordered and controversial ‘Fast Track Land Reform Programme’ is the key element in the government's attempt to recover consensus within a context of increasing political authoritarianism and economic crisis.

The many faces of the crisis

Economic difficulties, land occupations, famine, violence, political authoritarianism and international isolation have created an explosive and ‘exceptional’ cocktail of

tensions. Apparently, the crisis started in February 2000 with the referendum for modifying the Constitution proposed by the government and rejected by the electorate and with the subsequent mass wave of commercial farm occupations by veterans of the liberation war, and by groups of peasants belonging to the most marginalised rural communities. However, the problems which exploded four years ago go back even further and demonstrate, above all, how the parties involved (government, white and black elites, donors) had underestimated the situation. In particular, since the independence of the country in 1980, the land question has always inflamed the political debate with periodic episodes of violence and land occupations while the question of democracy and human rights has remained marginal within the international agenda and debates.

It is difficult to draw a clear distinction between the economic and the political elements of the crisis. ZANU-PF has been constantly in power since independence and its leader, Mugabe, has held the reins of the government since then, paving the way for a political system that combines authoritarian and democratic elements and that “is neither a parliamentary democracy [...] nor a presidential regime [...]. It is a system unbalanced and biased in favour of the Executive, and especially in favour of a President who concentrates most of the powers” (Makumbe and Compagnon, 2000:42). Moreover, the process of post-independence reconciliation between the different political groups within the country and the policy of ‘africanisation’ (and later ‘indigenisation’) of the economic, bureaucratic and political cadres of the state have allowed the ZANU-PF leadership to co-opt under the government’s umbrella important sections of Zimbabwe’s business and civil society, including trade unions (Sithole, 2000; Raftopoulos 2001a, 2001b).

Even if there is wide consensus about the fact that nowadays the legitimacy of President Mugabe is seriously disputed, nevertheless, the problem of establishing an adequate explanation for the causes of the crisis remains open. We need to turn our attention to the structural and political limits and contradictions of Zimbabwe’s post-independence political economy. Meanwhile, we have to take into consideration the political stance of the actors that bear the brunt of major responsibility for the crisis: Western governments (by proxy, we can say international donors), white commercial farmers, and, last but not least, the Zimbabwean leadership. The Western governments did not recognize the explosive character of the land question when supporting the ESAP. Despite the enormous problems the economic reforms were creating to the Zimbabwean economy and society, the white commercial farmers remained intransigent in the protection of their property rights, insisting on the ‘willing-seller willing-buyer’ approach to land reform; and the ZANU-PF leadership (particularly since the end of the 1980s) showed itself unable to fulfil the promises of social development and to implement a viable land reform programme. In particular, the misguided policies of the ruling party implemented in the 1990s with the ESAP and after 2000 with a ‘fast-track’ land resettlement programme resulted in the

abrogation of the rule of law and major violations of human rights, including severe torture and death (Lee, 2003).

Things started to change in 1997 when the political and economic crisis sharpened and a high level of social confrontation became clear. After 1996 the social unrest was evident with mass demonstrations, strikes and riots, particularly in the main urban areas. 1997 witnessed the protests of the war veterans, while the government gazetted an initial list of commercial farms subject to expropriation. In January 1998 there was an imposing demonstration to protest against the expensiveness of essential goods. 1998 also saw the start of movements of land occupations which were spontaneous, peaceful and not orchestrated by the party, a process which reminded the government of the need to boost land reform. The land question, then, reached a decisive crossroads, as “a shift in power occurred within the ruling party, when the war veterans took centre stage, (and) the land redistribution initiative was brought back to the centre of the development debate, now couched in the more popular discourses of nationalism and liberation” (Moyo, 2001:313).

As the crisis deepened, the authoritarian stance of the ruling party became more evident. Looking for legitimacy and consensus, the government dealt with the crisis by means of instrumental use of the land question and by invoking the historical heritage of the liberation struggle. President Mugabe has affirmed that the present policy aims at redressing the ills of colonialism by returning land to the peasantry: “The Government of Zimbabwe intends to continue the land redistribution programme [...]. This programme will redress the racial imbalances in the economic sphere [...] ” (Government of Zimbabwe, 1998). The land reform was therefore presented as the continuation of the liberation struggle while economic interests represented by the opposition and its Western allies were depicted as alien forces operating against the state. Therefore the state was legitimized to intervene against forces that were seen as ‘unpatriotic’ and ‘puppets of the West’ (Raftopoulos, 2004).

Given that the new policy had to face a widespread national and international critique centred on property rights, human rights and the rule of law, the ruling party constructed an alternative discourse centred on renewed liberation struggle solidarity; on the continuing effects of African marginalisation within globalisation; and on the fighting against liberal imperialism (Phimister, 2004). The crisis was articulated through political dichotomies on land, governance and nationalism (Hammar, Raftopoulos and Jensen, 2003:17), between progressive anti-colonial forces and selfish economic interests. As Dansereau clearly points out, this sort of bifurcated characterisation is “a useful simplification for a group trying to generate legitimacy for itself in the face of growing popular dissatisfaction” (Dansereau, 2003:173).

Despite the authoritarian attitude of the government, it would be misleading to characterise Mugabe’s regime as just another case of an African neo-patrimonial

state and to address the present crisis in Zimbabwe as either simply the problem of a man (Mugabe) unwilling to cede power or of a group of corrupt bureaucrats and politicians determined to exploit state economic resources for their private benefit (Compagnon, 2001). Following this image, in Zimbabwe the problem would be Mugabe: “the culprit for Zimbabwe’s continuing slide towards the abyss is President Robert Mugabe” (ICG, 2002:1). If it is clear that in Zimbabwe the question of democracy is central, however, the analysis of the crisis does not imply a simplified picture of a monolithic neo-patrimonial power structure. In this regard, “there is a continuous reference to the ideal form of divide between the public and the private of the European liberal state, never mind that this itself is an imagined one” (Bracking, 2003:14).

Many scholars of African politics have embraced the neo-patrimonial model using various labels: politics of the belly (Bayart, 1993), state merchant capital (Moore, 2001), disorder as political instrument (Chabal and Daloz, 1999), prebendal politics (Joseph, 1987). Bratton and van de Walle argued that “the distinctive institutional hallmark in the ancient regimes of postcolonial Africa is Neo-Patrimonialism” (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997:61). However, the neo-patrimonialist analysis or the ‘personal rule paradigm’, as Leonard and Strauss critically describe it (Leonard and Strauss, 2003), does not permit adequate debate on the complexities and on the difficulties encountered in the construction of the nation-state, on economic development and, above all, on the redistributive policies in post-independent countries which had to face political and economic constraints, a legacy of the colonial period. Broadly speaking, the so-called good governance agenda – supported by donors and based on multipartyism, competitive elections, the reduced role of the state, the protection of private property and the support of market forces – has paradoxically determined new economic opportunities for ruling elites (Dansereau, 2003).

In the Zimbabwean case, there has not been sufficient consideration of the relevance of the historical compromise of the 1980s; of the fact that an economic ‘grabbing’ by the elite was more evident through the indigenisation project developed under the umbrella of the neo-liberal procedures of ESAP; of the fact that the unsolved land question was put aside; and that the political space was increasingly reserved for groups representing elite interests. Mass-based organisations, expression of grassroots participation, such as trade unions, were co-opted in the 1980s and excluded from the public arena in the 1990s (Sachikonye, 1995). The complexity of the national and international pressures that have historically been significant in the post-independence Zimbabwean state, and the evolution of the political and economic strategies that the Zimbabwean leadership has put in place to maintain its internal legitimacy and assure its survival, deserve a much more elaborate analysis. As Logan and Tevera have observed: “for the government of Zimbabwe, economic development in the decades following majority rule has been an exercise in balanc-

ing three interrelated needs – those of social justice, capital generation, and regime survival” (Logan and Tevera, 2001:103).

The 1980s: The developmentalist state and social justice

The 1980s were characterised by a state and a leadership that had legitimacy based on the legacy of the liberation struggle and on a broad developmental social programme. In 1980 the independent government assumed power with promises to redress colonial injustices (especially to solve the land question) and bring about a socialist transformation of the society. However, with the establishment of majority rule, the economic and social imbalances between the white and black communities were not solved. During the colonial period, a white settler bourgeoisie (both agrarian and urban) was created with strong connections to foreign capital (Bond, 1998). After independence, the state gained control of a significant section of the national economy, but the private sector remained largely owned by white Zimbabweans or by international companies (Raftopoulos and Compagnon, 2003).

The Lancaster House agreement, which legally entrenched the property rights of the white minority, especially in agriculture, impeded significant changes in the distribution of economic resources. Beyond Lancaster House’s constitutional constraints, Zimbabwe’s considerable economic dependence on world markets and on external capital favoured Mugabe’s compromise with the white capital and his national reconciliation policy. He allowed the white minority to maintain the control of a large section of the economy. The government was committed to the implementation of a welfare programme aimed at improving the living conditions of the black majority of Zimbabweans, by means of a policy of high levels of economic growth, of increased social expenditure and of promotion of rural development. The first economic policy document of the new government, *Growth with equity*, made it clear stating that “economic exploitation of the majority by the few, the grossly uneven infrastructure and productive development of the rural and urban distribution sectors, the imbalanced levels of development within and among sectors and the consequent grossly inequitable pattern of income distribution and of benefits to the overwhelming majority of this country, stand as a serious indictment of our society” (GoZ, 1981:1).

The reconciliation policy towards the white minority and foreign economic interests attracted support by the international community, giving Mugabe an international moral stature and the imprimatur as a stabilising factor in Southern Africa in the apartheid era. In that period, the very repressive government reactions to opposition or criticism were not important to research and debate (Laakso, 2003:4). (However, broadly speaking, we can say that they were not important to international observers either.)

An alliance between white settlers and the state developed a historical compromise between black nationalists and sections of the white economic groups. During the 1980s, a strand of leftist scholars and observers had presented the case of Zimbabwe as the creation of a post-settler capitalist state. They criticised the economic policy of Mugabe's government, arguing that it did not address the economic structure inherited by colonialism. Astrow criticised the petty bourgeois character of the new ruling elite (Astrow, 1983), while Mandaza affirmed: "The post-white settler colonial state acquires a special meaning in the context of the foregoing, precisely because of the historical legacy of white settler colonialism; the inherited economic and social structures that are associated with it; and its persistent and pervasive role within both the state itself and the society at large, as a viable conduit through which the imperialist forces of international finance capital can compromise and control the new state" (Mandaza, 1986:15). The continuity between the political economy of post-independence Zimbabwe and the colonial period was evident not only in the preservation of the property relations inherited through colonialism, but also in the large role that the state continued to play in the country's economy.

This is the context in which we have to take into account the land question. In the 1980s the main objective was the redressing of the historical imbalances in the access to land (redistribution within a social justice agenda). After an initially accelerated process of reform in the early 1980s, the programme slowed down and with the implementation of ESAP, the redistributive reform stopped, as we will see. The twenty years up to 2000 have shown that land reform was not an event but a process which depended on the broader political context, an area of clashes and an instrument for constructing ideological and political options.

In the 1980s, as already said, the government enjoyed broad consensus deriving from the liberation struggle. However, the attitude of strong state intervention in the transformation process was carried forward without assessing the effects on civil and individual rights. In particular, the trade unions at that time were co-opted within the political system and subordinated to the party. In this regard, Sachikonye affirms that "the first five years of independence witnessed dominant state intervention in labour relations with a visible bias to the immediate interests of the bourgeoisie" (Sachikonye, 1995:139). The authority of the ruling party was not questioned as the majority of the country's organisations aligned themselves to the state's developmentalist discourse and the message of national unity (Moyo, Makumbe and Raftopoulos, 2000).

However, national unity had already been torn apart by the Matabeleland crisis. The agreement for unity between ZANU and ZAPU in 1987 stopped the violence and led to a greater concentration of powers within the ruling party. The disparity between the rights enshrined in the Constitution and the *de facto* rules existing in the country provided the opposition with reasons for contesting the ruling party's policies (Makumbe and Compagnon, 2000).

The 1980s were characterised by a combination of expenditure for the social state, redistributive land reform, attempts at minimum wage guarantees and economic growth. However, the results were not those hoped for. At the end of the decade, the end of bipolarism and the expansion of the neo-liberal orthodoxy pushed Zimbabwe towards the road for structural adjustment. The new convergent interests between local business (both white and black) and the state elite looking for new ways of accumulation created the basis for changes to the development model (Dashwood, 2000).

The first decade of independence ended with economic problems on the increase, an opposition movement in the embryonic stage and signs of profound damage to the notion of national unity imposed by ZANU-PF, while the land question remained suspended.

ESAP and neo-liberal policies

According to the programmatic document which, in 1991, listed the ESAP reforms, the economic reform programme intended to support medium-long term growth by means of economic and commercial liberalisation (GoZ, 1991). ESAP established the abandoning of the welfare policies of the 1980s – including the land resettlement programme – in favour of the recovery of the ‘colonial economic model’ based on the domination of the white community, which was joined by the new emerging class of black entrepreneurs. Therefore, neo-liberal policies “reinforced broadly undemocratic policy-making practices, and influenced the evolution of land policy towards an elitist agenda”, while “large business, large white farmers, and a nascent black bourgeoisie [...] supported the resultant ESAP programme” (Tevera, 2003).

Indeed, the structural adjustment programme marked a clear turning point for the corporatist strategy (Bond, 1998:259) that ZANU-PF had pursued during the 1980s. The main argument put forward by proponents of the neo-liberal economic reforms like the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries and the Commercial Farmers’ Union was that state controls on prices, the high level of internal financing of the public deficit, and the protectionist trade regime were stifling the Zimbabwean economy. Only a radical strategy of economic deregulation and liberalisation would have removed the structural imbalances that were hampering economic growth in Zimbabwe (Skålnes, 1993).

The process was accompanied by strong requests for increased participation by the black entrepreneurial middle class, by means of indigenisation processes which had already characterised the economic processes of other African countries. In the case of Zimbabwe, Raftopoulos summarised that the ruling elite, fearing that a new bourgeoisie would be less easy to control, showed interest in courting the emerging black business groups who were guaranteed the conditions to find new spaces for

their accumulation project within the neo-liberal environment of ESAP (Raftopoulos 2001a; Raftopoulos and Compagnon, 2003). These processes led to the creation of a new alliance between the government, the new black commercial elite and the whites; the emerging indigenous capital, the white farmer associations, technocrats and many NGOs supported a change in the economic policy.

At this point, we must investigate the reasons for the serious crisis created by the ESAP, the impossibility of using the reforms as an instrument for economic and technological reform, and why ESAP was unable to deal with the regional and international challenges. Since 1990, the government of Zimbabwe has been implementing “with determination and persistence” (WB, 1997:3) the structural adjustment programme. Given that many extensive analyses have been conducted into the nature and effects of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe (Sachikonye, 1993 and 1999; Mlambo, 1997; Chipika, Chibanda and Kadenge, 2000; Moyo, 2000a; Kanyenze 2003a and 2003b), here I only refer to the structural pressures that the neo-liberal economic reforms have exerted on the Zimbabwean economy.

First and foremost, ESAP caused a worsening in living conditions for considerable sections of the population, especially the urban population; the collapse in salaries favoured a serious increase in poverty (Kanyenze, 2003a and 2003b) and increased social and economic inequalities, eroding the legitimacy of the government itself. The weight of the economic crisis was supported by the weak and vulnerable sector of the population. Sachikonye’s analysis shows how the socio-economic improvements of the 1980s have been eroded during ESAP (Sachikonye, 2002). Furthermore, the government was not able to reduce the negative impact of the effects of liberalisation which provided incentives for importing South African industrial products (often subsidised), fostering serious processes of de-industrialisation in Zimbabwe and a worsening in its balance of payments (Moyo, 2000b:7). The manufacturing sector’s contribution to GDP gradually fell, while the contributions of agriculture and services both expanded, signalling a sort of ‘re-primarisation’ of the economy of Zimbabwe, while a new and dangerous speculative economy developed, mirrored in the boom of the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange in recent years (Bond, 1998).

However, the main victim of the economic reforms was without doubt the redistributive land reform. The advantages of ESAP were mainly reaped by the commercial agriculture sector which benefited for a number of years from the export of non-traditional products and from agricultural tourism (Moyo, 2000a), fostering new conflicts between white and black elites, on one hand, and the rest of the peasants, on the other (Moyo and Matondi, 2001; Moyo, 2000a and 2000c). While there was emphasis on the growth of agricultural production for exporting, there was no adequate support in favour of the production of small producers. Therefore, while in 1989 the commercial agriculture sector accounted for 60% of agricultural production, in 1993 it accounted for 90%, while the Communal Lands sector, over the

same period, passed from 32% in 1989 to 26% in 1990 and 19% in 1993 (Logan and Tevera, 2001:120).

Moyo argued that new land use patterns and production oriented towards cash crops and global markets determined a shifting in government's priorities over land reform, fuelling by the end of the 1990s a new struggle for redistribution (Moyo, 2000b and 2001). As recognised by the Vice Representative of the World Bank in Zimbabwe, ESAP underestimated the need to deal with the country's history of economic dualism (van den Brink, 2000) while the policy of indigenisation was not accompanied by adequate development policies.

Finally, ESAP internationalised the land question: the donors ever increasingly expressed a different view from the government, losing the chance to support sustainable land reform, one of the many reasons behind the ever bigger room for manoeuvre for the hardliners within the party and the government supporting a radical land reform.

From 1997 onwards: Crisis and political authoritarianism

From 1997 Zimbabwe was marked out by economic collapse and deepening of the country's political crisis. The escalation of the crisis in the following years rendered ineffective all attempts to find a negotiated solution. As already illustrated, high levels of social and political confrontation developed, in particular after the 1996 strikes. The harsh urban social conflict led to a clear break in the social contract which had previously existed. The strikes during the period 1996–1998 met with massive support from workers, and without doubt contributed to the labour movement becoming one of the leading political forces in Zimbabwe at the end of the 1990s (Saunders, 2001). In 1999 this high level of social and political opposition paved the way for the formation of a big coalition of opposition forces, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Parallel to this process, a second level of social confrontation became evident. The ruling party had to deal with an even more demanding challenge which threatened its legitimacy: the challenge of the war veterans. Trying to assuage the claims of a social group that had historically proved to be a close political ally of ZANU-PF (Kriger, 2001), Mugabe offered the war veterans a one-off payment and a monthly pension in 1997.

In this context of social unrest and government's loss of legitimacy, the issue of land reform acquired a prominent role in the consensus-building strategy of ZANU-PF and, more generally, in the crisis that grips Zimbabwe. In November 1997, the government gazetted 1,471 farms for compulsory acquisition (with partial compensation). A new impetus for radical land reform in Zimbabwe had been set in motion. The difficult economic situation allowed the government to relaunch the ideology of land redistribution and, through this, to continue to domi-

nate the voting in the rural areas, while the authoritarian involution led to the donors' gradual abandoning of support for any reform. It can be argued that the deepening economic and social crisis and the growing mobilisation of some of the social groups that had been further marginalized by the implementation of the structural adjustment programme, pushed Mugabe and the ZANU-PF leadership to turn their backs on economic reforms and to gradually resort to an authoritarian and populist political strategy in order to maintain or re-gain their political legitimacy among the Zimbabwean electorate (rural in particular).

2000 was the year of reckoning for the problems of the preceding decade. The defeat during the February referendum led the government to launch a new land campaign. Through the support of the war veterans the ruling party orchestrated a nationwide occupation of commercial farms. As various studies have shown (Marongwe, 2001; Moyo, 2001), farm occupations were part of the political and social landscape after independence. However, in 2000 the increasing marginalisation of the rural poor – due to the neo-liberal policies combined with the threat of political defeat for the government – created a favourable environment for a mass operation of occupations led by the war veterans. If, on the one hand, the occupations marked the considerable level of grievances on the land question, on the other hand, they took place outside a context of political accountability and through the use of violence.

Furthermore, since the ruling party put forward its version of the redistribution, it became increasingly hostile to dissent and to civil rights policies, referring to them as the preoccupations of a minority hostile to the redistribution of the land and led by forces supported by the West. "Accompanying the physical violence, the ruling party launched a torrent of abuse on the opposition, designed to depict them as a privileged urban minority controlled by whites and foreigners, and 'tainted' with money from 'right-wing conservative racists associated with Rhodesia'" (Raftopoulos, 2001b:18). As affirmed in 2000, on the eve of parliamentary elections, by the Minister of Information Jonathan Moyo,

[t]he human rights NGOs supporting the MDC [...] are well known for using equal political and civil rights to justify unequal economic rights. And that is what the British want to see in Zimbabwe: a spectacle of getting the black majority to use political rights to defend unequal rights between blacks and whites under the guise of democracy (Raftopoulos, 2003b:218).

The question of the international attention on the Zimbabwean crisis being related to the preoccupation about the future of white commercial farmers was reinforced, for instance, in an ICG report in which it was emphasized that "the international media's over-concentration on the plight of white commercial farmers has given Mugabe's liberation rhetoric greater resonance in many African quarters, reinforcing belief that the West cares about Zimbabwe only because whites suffer" (ICG, 2002:1).

The electoral campaigns of 2000 and 2002 were characterised by tension and violence never seen before in the electoral history of Zimbabwe. The land question was central in the ZANU-PF election campaign: “Mugabe repeatedly emphasised the land as the sole authentic signifier of national belonging as defined by selective political criteria of the ruling party” (Raftopoulos, 2001b:19). In this liberation narrative of a common African history and of Pan-Africanist solidarity, the land played a fundamental role as the key marker of a new struggle, and of the ruling party’s construction of belonging, exclusion and history.

The ruling party based its campaign for land reform on the slogan ‘The Land Is the Economy, the Economy Is the Land’. The MDC, on the other hand, focused its campaign on the handling and management of the economy and reforms in governance (*chinja*: change). While ZANU-PF claimed that the opposition wanted to upset land reform as it had sold itself to the old colonial masters, the opposition accused the government of offering land to its friends and of turning the land question into its own monopoly despite its inability to solve it over twenty years (Moyo, 2001). Therefore, the land question, a historical necessity for the country, was made ‘political’ for electoral purposes.

In July 2000 the government started the implementation of its radical land reform: the so-called ‘Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme’ aiming, through expropriation, to transfer most of former white commercial farms to small peasant farmers and black entrepreneurs. The objectives are to provide the landless with opportunities, favour employment, overturn the country’s poverty, and reduce the pressure on the land and the political tension related to access to the land (GoZ, 2001a and 2001b).

Recent years have revealed the crisis of a political and social model which had guided the country for about twenty years, albeit in various stages. Farm occupations and the following Fast Track programme resulted in “a major response to the exhaustion of the structural adjustment accumulation model” (Raftopoulos, 2001b:17), that is, the end of the ‘historic compromise’ (or ‘elite consensus’) between the post-colonial state and the capital. Meanwhile, it was evident that the neo-liberal economic model and the political opposition represented in particular by civil society organisations had been unable to address the land issue that it was no longer possible to delay. As Raftopoulos affirmed, the political opposition of the MDC “support a pluralist approach of national politics, insisting on the imperatives of the democratisation and of the rule of law. However, this programme is managed in the name of a pure and hard neo-liberalism [...] leaving Mugabe the possibility to present his positions as anti-imperialistic in spite of the grotesque character of his political intolerance” (Raftopoulos, 2001a:50; my translation from French).

In this way, Mugabe was able to define the parameters of the debate on Zimbabwe on the continent in his favour, framing the crisis around the land question as an unconcluded part of the anti-colonial programme, managing to get people to forget

his errors and to maintain the support of the SADC countries. He erected a barrier of anti-imperialist solidarity around his domestic political project. It is worth noting that he has been helped by shortsighted Western, particularly British, intervention. The initial damage was done in 1997 when “‘new’ Labour’s arrogant denial of any responsibility for past colonial injustices in Zimbabwe, was hugely compounded by the Blair government’s subsequent embrace of so-called ‘liberal imperialism’” (Raftopoulos and Phimister, 2004). The ruling party’s rhetoric was able to construct a sense of belonging through the use of history. The history of the liberation struggle was translated into an official discourse aimed at giving legitimacy to the authoritarian nationalism, and to the selective image of citizenship reinforced by the instrumental use of the land question (Hammar, Raftopoulos and Jensen, 2003).

The period 2000–2004 has therefore resulted in a serious internal crisis and a political impasse. The political divide lasting from 2000 up to now and expressed by the polarisation of the Fast Track programme, the deepening of the economic crisis and the authoritarian stance of the government against opposition and civil society has impeded finding a negotiated solution. In particular there is a strong preoccupation with the question of human rights abuses. In regard to the Fast Track programme, it was – according to the government – successfully completed in 2003, while its opponents highlight the chaotic way in which it was conducted, the high level of violent confrontation and the collapse of agricultural production resulting in more poverty and an increase in hunger and famine (Sachikonye, 2003). Meanwhile, all attempts to resume talks, including SADC’s mediation, have failed, maintaining a high level of crisis and social conflict that impeded and made remote any chance for a negotiated transition.

Conclusion

We have to discuss in which way a negotiated political transition, including the solution of the land question, can be set in motion. Some analysts consider that the objective of inter-party negotiations to address the multiple aspects of that crisis appears to be no longer realistic (ICG, 2004). As published in Zimbabwe, “Mugabe’s insistence on contrition by the MDC as a pre-condition for the resumption of talks has reinforced the long held view that the ruling ZANU-PF is not interested in inter-party dialogue” (*Financial Gazette*, Harare, 23rd April 2004). The fact that ZANU-PF won several by-elections was part of the reason for the stalled talks. Recently MDC has threatened to boycott elections unless the government adheres to elections guidelines discussed during the August SADC Heads of State Summit held in Mauritius (*IRIN*, 25th August 2004). However it must be considered that with the prospect of 2005 elections it is of vital importance to create a framework of negotiation to restore an environment favourable for the taking place of free and fair elections. Indeed, according to South African Deputy Foreign

Affairs Minister van der Merwe, “we firmly believe that there is no alternative to the dialogue that must take place between the MDC and ZANU-PF to resolve the problems in Zimbabwe” (*Argus Cape*, Cape Town, 19th August 2004).

In conclusion, two questions are particularly relevant: *First*, up to now, the struggle for democratisation has not been able to favour the union of different social and political forces within a new social project aimed at the creation of redistributive social and political rights. Due to this and to the systematic use of violence and coercion by the ruling party, ZANU-PF has been able to maintain its political control in the rural areas. Indeed, “the path to democracy [...] was interrupted by two kinds of anti-democratic backlashes in early 2000: the sudden neo-liberal turn taken by the MDC [...] and Mugabe’s revival of a myth-heavy nationalism via promotion of land invasions alongside ridiculous assertions that the MDC threat was not indigenous” (Bond and Manyanya, 2003:xiv). *Second*, it is crucial to recognise that in Zimbabwe as well as in Southern Africa, the land question, as still unresolved, must be addressed in terms of equity and social justice. Democracy and human rights are linked to the solution of the historic struggle for land. For a long time, all the stakeholders have ignored the requirements for social justice contained in the requests for land reform. Therefore, it is necessary that the demands for democracy and political reform incorporate the land issue within economic development programmes. The land reform is possible and it must be democratic and redistributive; it cannot be only market-based and it may break with the past (Lahiff, 2003). In this regard, as mentioned above, the crisis in Zimbabwe has important repercussions on the post-settler state in Southern Africa. Its experience can be instructive if we realize that the country’s crisis does not depend on the land question *per se*, but on its relationship with the political and economic crisis (Sachikonye, 2002).

The question which remains unanswered is whether the future in Zimbabwe will be one of authoritarian nationalism, democratic nationalism or social democracy: “a one party state representing the General Will and in particular the will of workers and peasants has been both practically and theoretically discredited. But recognition of the need for pluralism and devolution of powers has not produced effective institutional change. Rights discourse in Zimbabwe, polarised around the tension between the state and civil society has not taken on board the fact of conflicting rights claims” (Ranger, 2003:26).

Having highlighted these aspects, we can agree with Bond and Manyanya when they say that “instead of the false choice of exhausted nationalism or looming neo-liberalism there still exist excellent prospects for a sustained social-justice struggle” (Bond and Manyanya, 2003:xvi). Indeed, the debate on the Zimbabwean crisis has laid open, for the international left, the challenge of moving beyond the imperatives of neo-liberal capitalism, without forgetting the question of democratic alternatives. One of the many risks in dealing with this crisis is that of being caught in the ‘trap’ of either reproducing the nationalist rhetoric of the Zimbabwean government (the

crisis is a land crisis) or adopting the neo-liberal approach (a crisis of governance). A very sensitive issue, caught by Yeros when he stressed the fact that Zimbabwean urban civic forces pressing for democratic accountability remain cognisant of the bourgeois nature of this platform while ignoring the democratic deficit of their position (Yeros, 2002).

We must recognise the need for new development policies that, in the particular case of the highly-divided societies of Southern Africa, need a central focus on land reform. We have to question the structure of the political economy in a region where society is highly dualistic, with a core well connected to the international economy and a large periphery made up of informal activities and a rural subsistence economy. In Zimbabwe, most of the stakeholders neglected the “demand for land reform and pretend that the simmering land occupation movement is insignificant, even though this movement has been crucial [...] in forcing the land reform issue onto the political agenda” (Moyo, 2001:329).

Therefore, the legitimate aspirations for democratisation, and for the reform of the internal political system have to deal with the land question, a question which cannot be used as a political instrument for the maintenance of the *status quo* by a worn-out power, nor can it be put aside. This is why it is necessary to recreate the premises for a strong link between democratisation processes and fair and equal distribution of the resources. A question never resolved in Zimbabwe and which must be tackled, whatever the government in power may be over the coming years.

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